A JOURNAL OF WESTERN OKLAHOMA
WESTVIEW

Volume 14
Issue 4 *Summer*

Article 12

7-15-1995

"Air Is Between These Words"

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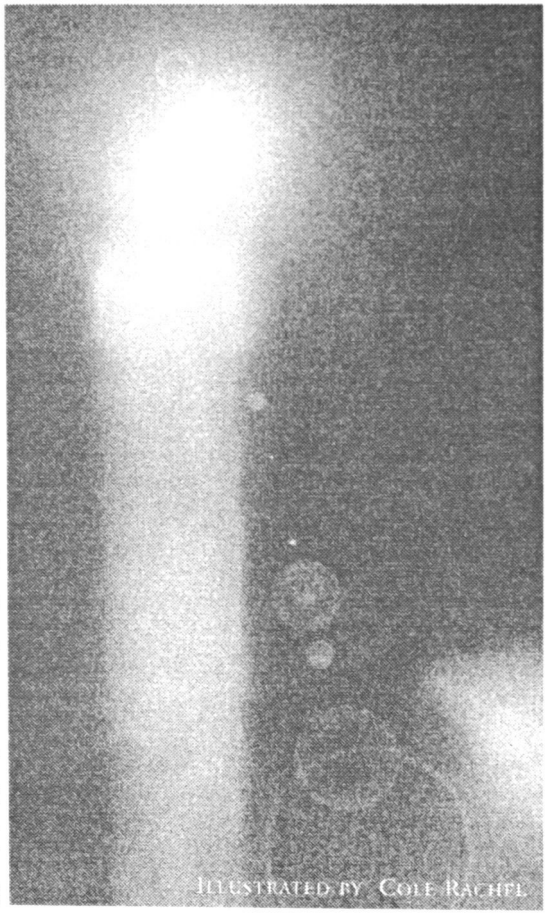
by Helen Maxson

I have always been amazed that the flames devouring a burning log come from inside it. It was a jolt to learn that, despite appearances, flame does not spread from one burning object to another; it begins in a log's own stored energy, activated and liberated by an external source of heat. Astonishing.

Fire has been a life-long fascination of mine. I felt immense frustration as a twelve-year-old Girl Scout when a campfire would not catch hold because the wood was damp or green. With reverence I would coax the weak flame, trying to absorb into my face or hands any part of its warmth that I could. Later, it was chiefly for the campfires that I bought a well-made tent and embarked on years of camping trips. Too, I have treasured the wood stoves and fireplaces in my homes. Over time, I have developed a sixth sense about building fires, an intuition about how the logs must be adjusted to nurture the flames. I can tell where in a pile of burning wood the air must flow, and where one log needs close contact with another. I have wanted what these laws can give, finding nourishment in making a fire go.



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Lately I've been burning a candle as I do schoolwork or read. Somehow I endow the flame with the power to lighten drudgery, ease pressure, vitalize routine, soothe loneliness, and push back, at least a little, any gloom that gathers. Now that a flame's light and motion have become constant attendants on my work and thinking, I feel their absence acutely when I run out of candles. I have wondered what gives the flame its meaning for me. What psychic room does it fill so well, warming some negligent guardian angel to her task?

A while ago, I started reading poetry about fire to see what it could tell me about my fascination. As an English teacher and ardent fan of creative writing, I read a fair amount of poetry on a regular basis. I have believed for a long time that there is nothing like a poem to express the unconscious. The suggestiveness of its imagery, the multiple meanings of its metaphors, the fluidity of its music derive from patterns in the poet's mind and seek out those in the reader's. In conveying meaning, the poem's elasticity molds itself to the reader's sense of things without losing its own integrity, making the reader's mind known. So, in wondering why I am drawn to fire, I turned to poetry, knowing that the things I noticed there would tell me about myself. Since American Indian legend is rich in symbol and centered on the elemental, I had a feeling that contemporary Indian verse would say a great deal about fire. I was right.

In a poem called "Fire," Joy Harjo, a Creek (Muscogee) poet, writes:

a woman can't survive
by her own breath
alone

. . . . . .

look at me
i am not a separate woman
i am a continuance
of blue sky
i am the throat
of the sandia mountains
a night wind woman
who burns
with every breath
she takes

Imagine burning with every breath we take! Do we really live that intensely? For Harjo's speaker, the breath that sustains life is also the wind that fans a fire. In seeing herself as a night wind woman who is "not a separate woman," she sees herself as serving life in general, using her own burning and breathing to support those of others. Women are crucial to existence, she is insisting. And fire represents a fundamental energy, I add, letting the poem shed light on my own fascination.

It is an intense life that the night wind woman lives and serves: her vitality is as potent as a fire is hot. She is continuous with the wind, even as she breathes it in. She is continuous with the mountains, even as she expresses their message. Simultaneously part of the subject she is writing about and separate from it as its observer, she finds the message of her verse in the breathing and burning that comprise her own life.

I cannot say that the flame of my candle casts my life in such glorious terms. But perhaps it does kindle in me the energy of things that live, and a kind of nurturing peculiar to women. Does the flame offer me the comfort that I try to give others as a woman friend? Maybe. Or maybe, like a poem that probes our psyches, a flame reflects us, male and female alike, back to ourselves, answering our needs as well as only we, ourselves, can. Perhaps in describing a flame we are both subject and speaker, like Harjo in her poem. We are continuous with the flame, and, like the poet who, continuous with the wind, breathes it in, we burn in describing the flame, both part of and separate from it. I do know that no other part of my life excites me more than that small part of it reserved for writing, a process which expresses me as a flame expresses the energy of a candle's wick.

But fire isn't always constructive, as a poem by Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan, called "The History of Fire," makes clear:

. . . . . .

My dear one is a jar of burned bones
I have saved.

This is where our living goes
and still we breathe,

and even the dry grass
with sun and lightning above it

has no choice but to grow
and then lie down

with no other end in sight.

Air is between these words,
fanning the flame.

There is a downbeat determinism to this poem that aims far afield of the nourishment I find in flame. But still, to burn is to live, here, as in Harjo's poem, asserting in Hogan's lament of death the will to live that both poems represent with flame. And for Hogan as for Harjo, to express is to burn: "Air is between these

words,/ fanning the flame." Earlier in the poem, Hogan has described herself as "wind for the fire." As poet she provides both wind and words, as Harjo does. But for Hogan in this poem, what is burning finally burns up. For her, burning is living is writing is dying. And so, even the poem will be extinguished in time. But extinguished how? completely forgotten? its relevance lost? The poem doesn't explain; it simply asserts. And won't there be other poems to replace this one? (Won't there be more grass to replace the poem's dry grass that lies down after growing?) It may be in the immortality of the expressive spirit and in the poet's continuing love for her dead dear one that the poem faintly suggest ways of going on even after the burning burns out. Can art transform death to life? Can love? Does my hope for a happy ending reflect the hope that I find in the candle?

I bought an amaryllis bulb a few weeks ago, knowing that its fast growth would bring me great satisfaction. Sure enough, the light green blades made appreciable progress each day. They grew round, gaining over a foot of height in a few weeks. A flame-shaped bud plumped out at the end of each one, traced eventually by two graceful, length-wise grooves that would separate its shell into two halves of a green claw. Then, from the claw's grasp, a huge blossom slowly emerged. The red, cream-tinged petals unfolded in daily increments, each one a step in some mystic journey toward perfection. I knew that the flower's opening mirrored some growth in myself, and that I cared a great deal that the plant thrive.

The amaryllis sat on a shelf next to my candle. Until I saw them side by side, I had not often thought of green plants and fire together, separating them into different orders of things. After all, fire is luminous and warming, while most plants do not glow, and suggest a season when no warming is needed. Furthermore, fire destroys plants, and the water that nourishes plants extinguishes fire. Nonetheless, studying them together, I became aware that they engaged the same part of me, sharing some personal symbolism which I wanted to understand. A poem by Linda Hogan called "Geraniums" brought flowers and flame together in a way that helped me do that.

Life is burning
in everything, in red flowers
abandoned in an empty house,
the leaves nearly gone,
curtains and tenants gone,
but the flowers red and fiery
are there and singing,
let us out.

Even dying they have fire.
Imprisoned, they open,
so like our own lives blooming,
exploding, wanting out,
wanting love,
water,
wanting.

And you, with your weapons and badges
and your fear about what neighbors think
and working overtime
as if the boss will reward you,
you can't bloom that way
so open the door,
break the glass. There's fire
in those flowers. Set off the alarm.
What's a simple crime of property
when life, breath, and all
is at stake?

In the geranium image, the energy of burning and the energy of growing are one. The poem is about liberating

them. In it, what gets burned up is not what lives, but what entraps or impoverishes life. Hogan would set the empty house afire in order to free the flowers. I think of my amaryllis breaking out of its claw. I think of my restlessness when the schoolwork becomes tedious. Can I be as contemptuous of my salary as Hogan would have me be? Is my inner flame weakening because I am not? Does my candle reassure me that my spirit will survive yet another set of compositions, burning through it one paper at a time?

In this poem, living is burning is singing ("The flowers" are "singing/ let us out"). Adding singing to the significance of burning points to one more aspect of my restlessness when I am working. Assessing other people's writing makes me eager to get to my own, eager to sing my own song. And the poem encourages my frustration at having to wait to do it until there is time. Unlike the poet's dear one, the geraniums live and burn and sing in spite of death; they do not succumb inevitably to it. In fact, they are intensified in trying to defeat it. If one is not living fully, she has started to die. Living fully is an all-or-nothing choice here, and the poem strongly urges us to make it, reminding me how much vitality I would reclaim if I could spend my days writing.

If one remembers that fire resides, as potential, inside whatever will burn, a candle and a plant seem naturally related. Plants contain their own growth as they contain their own flame. After reading Hogan's geranium poem, it is not hard to think of the two energies together. In the poem "I Make the Fire," the Menominee poet Chrystos sees them as different stages of one evolution.

. . . . . .

as I go to the wood shed
Tiny green feathers of new growth fir
curl & dance under my feet
Heavy winds last night
In my arms a sweet smell of cedar
debris from the shake mill
I'm a woman who carries kindling
& her past
as she prays.

The new growth fir that curls and dances around the poet's feet as she goes to the wood shed could wind up at the timber mill, and, ultimately, as kindling being carried to a fire. But now it is fragile and new and promising. And the mill is benign; its cedar debris smells sweet. One needs not fear its work. In timber terms, a shake is a fissure in a tree caused during its growth by wind or frost. In this poem, the winds have been heavy, possibly producing imperfect wood that will need to be milled. Appropriately, the poet carries, along with her kindling, her past. She will burn it to make way for her own growth. And as she makes her fire, she prays. The fir dancing under her feet, and the fire she will build suggest a holy rite that will bless the future it brings in.

I can't say I plan to cremate my amaryllis when its blossoms have gone by. But I know its growing seems a temporary version of the candle's burning. My sense of the flower includes its dying, while, though one candle gives way to another, I see a flame as changeless. It will appear the same as always when the next plant is growing beside it, the living energy that endures into the next stage of my life. The next stage. What encouragement I find in believing one will come, bringing me a little closer to whatever perfection I'm aiming for. And perhaps I do assume, like the woman who carries her past with her kindling and prays, that my reverence for candle and plant will bless the journey whose stages they trace.

I remember how glad I was to find my current candle holder. The candle sits deep in a glass cup whose flared rim rests on an encircling stand. The books and papers I move around as I work aren't likely to catch fire. The flame itself reflects off the curved glass behind it, magnifying its own light. Sometimes candle and holder remind me of a lighthouse, shining its transcendent beacon on all the dangers of earning a living. Circle around this reef of discouragement, it says. Come this way to avoid that rock of fatigue.

In the end, despite the specific insights on the charisma of flame offered by my poets, I guess it is inspiration of a more general, and maybe more personal, sort that makes the candle so important to me. Uplift. Pleasure. Trust in the lighthouse. Delight at seeing my shelf washed in color as the flame shines downward through liquid red wax. Confidence that the order and elegance of vanilla fragrance can prevail over the chaos of too much work and too little time. Fascination that a small shape of bright light can bend and stretch and dance without diffusing into the soft surrounding glow.

Fascination. A spell cast by a candle in which many responses are woven. The musing gaze that enacts it is a mystic rite, the kindling of an inner flame that expresses the gazer's most vital self, encouraging that self to be.